

Young and Old Cows Just Need a Little Extra Care

By Kris Ringwall
Extension Beef Specialist
NDSU Extension Service



How old should a cow be when her production days are over? For those selling or buying short-term cows, that is a very good question.

Research shows cows start their productive careers producing light calves and end the same way. But how light is light?

For producers who have good production records, this information should be printed on the calving distribution report. The North Dakota State University Dickinson Research Extension Center utilizes the Cow Herd Appraisal and Performance Software (CHAPS) production record system and the calving distribution report is always printed as a concluding summary report for the overall herd report.

In reviewing the 2002 report, the herd produced 203,584 pounds of calf, an average actual calf weight of 526 pounds. This total weight came from cows ranging in age from 2 to more than 12. In most herds, the majority of the cows tend to be younger and have a greater impact on production than the older cows.

Our herd is no different: 98 2-year-olds and only six cows that are more than 12 years old. In the center's herd, the average calf weaning weight for 2-year-old cows was 445 pounds; the calves from 3-year-olds averaged 494 pounds and the 4-year-olds' calves averaged 579 pounds--a huge gain from the previous age group. The 4-year-old cows are finally producing to their potential. This is a sign of maturity, with a greater ability to milk and support a calf.

Interestingly, in years past, many producers didn't bother to breed heifers. In fact, the cows produced their first calf as 3-year-olds, a luxury assumed not affordable with today's cash demands in the beef business. Notice that I said "assumed" because I'm not sure I have read a definitive article on the impact of early production on overall longevity of the cow. If early production actually decreases longevity, perhaps the answer would be different.

But for now, cows are expected to produce a calf at 2 years of age. As 5-year-olds, our cows produced 591-pound weaning weights and reached peak production at 6

years of age. The 6-year-olds weaned calves at an average of 617 pounds. The obvious conclusion is to keep as many 6-year-old cows as possible in the herd, because production begins to go down at 7 years of age, at least for the cows at the center in 2002. The 7-year-old cows weaned 598 pounds of calf, the 8-year-olds weaned 560 pounds of calf and the 9-year-olds weaned 513 pounds of calf.

The data shows the 10-year-old cows dipped to an average of 476 pounds of calf. Due to small numbers, only 11 cows, this may have been a fluke, since the 27 11-year-old cows weaned an average of 517 pounds of calf, followed by cows 12 or more years old at 477 pounds.

A review of several data sets shows cows reach peak production around 5 to 7 years of age and gradually decrease. The question of when cows should no longer remain in the herd remains.

Whether old, young or in peak production, cows will produce the same calf, genetically speaking. However that calf will simply be lighter at weaning if it's born to an old or young cow, generally due to decreased milk production.

There are, however, some options for management. One obvious choice is to consider earlier weaning of calves from older and younger cows. This will allow the calves from young and old cows to grow at their genetic growth rate in the feed yard plus give a little extra rest to the cows that most need it.

A good present for those short-term cows would be early weaning and a little extra feed. A good present for producers would be the CHAPS program.

May you find all your ear tags.

Your comments are always welcome at www.BeefTalk.com. For more information, contact the North Dakota Beef Cattle Improvement Association, 1133 State Avenue, Dickinson, ND 58601 or go to www.CHAPS2000.com on the Internet. In correspondence about this column, refer to BT0121.

2002 Average Calf Weaning Weight by Cow Age

Cow Age	Average Weaning Weight
2	445 lbs
3	494 lbs
4	579 lbs
5	591 lbs
6	617 lbs
7	598 lbs
8	560 lbs
9	513 lbs
10+	501 lbs

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